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Th. Right Hon. EARL

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Royal Institution of Great Britain.

WEEKLY EVENING MEETING,

Friday, May 6, 1887.

The Right Hon. EARL PERCY, Manager and Vice-President, in the
Chair.

T. LAUDER BRUNTON, M.D. Sc.D. F.R.S.

The Element of Truth in Popular Beliefs.

THE common saying "Seeing is believing" gives a clue to the origin of many popular delusions, for the evidence of our eyes is by no means to be trusted, and unless corrected by the observations derived from other senses will often prove deceptive. Some popular beliefs are correct in regard to fact, but erroneous in regard to interpretation. Some others, which in their present form are absurd, are the survivals or modifications of other beliefs which were true.

In endeavouring to discover the element of truth in any belief we may be aided by tracing its history backwards in time, or by comparing it with allied forms of belief in different places.

As an example of the historical method we may take the belief that horse-flesh is unfit for food, a delusion which arose from the circumstance that horse-flesh was unfit for Christian food, inasmuch as the horse was sacred to Odin, and eating its flesh was a sign of Paganism.

As an illustration of the comparative method we may take the belief that a person cannot die if any door in the house be locked. Other forms of the belief are that a person cannot die as long as the doors or windows of the room in which he is lying are closed, and observation enables us to ascertain that this is due to the fact that the room is thus kept warm, and life therefore prolonged.

The belief that disease may be cured by hanging up rags in a sacred place may be connected by intermediate forms with the fact that infectious diseases may be conveyed from one to another by articles of clothing.

Some omens probably have an historical origin. Others depend on physical conditions, such as stumbling on leaving the threshold as an indication of coming misfortune. This may be regarded as simply an evidence of a deficiency in the motor power of the individual which may cause him to fail in an emergency.

Others again may be referred to indistinct sensations or sub-conscious conditions. Dreams are frequently influenced by the circumstances of the dreamer, either at the time or some days before,

and hallucinations as well as visions of ghosts and fairies may be regarded as forms of waking dreams.

The signs which were regarded in the Middle Ages as distinctive of witchcraft are now looked upon as symptoms of hysteria, and the condition of hysteria may perhaps be defined to be one in which impressions originating within the body itself tend to overpower those transmitted from without by the usual sensory channels.

The phenomena of thought reading and of the divining rod may in many cases be explained by the fact that sensory impressions may be received and may lead to action without rising into complete consciousness in the individual who receives them.

[T. L. B.]



